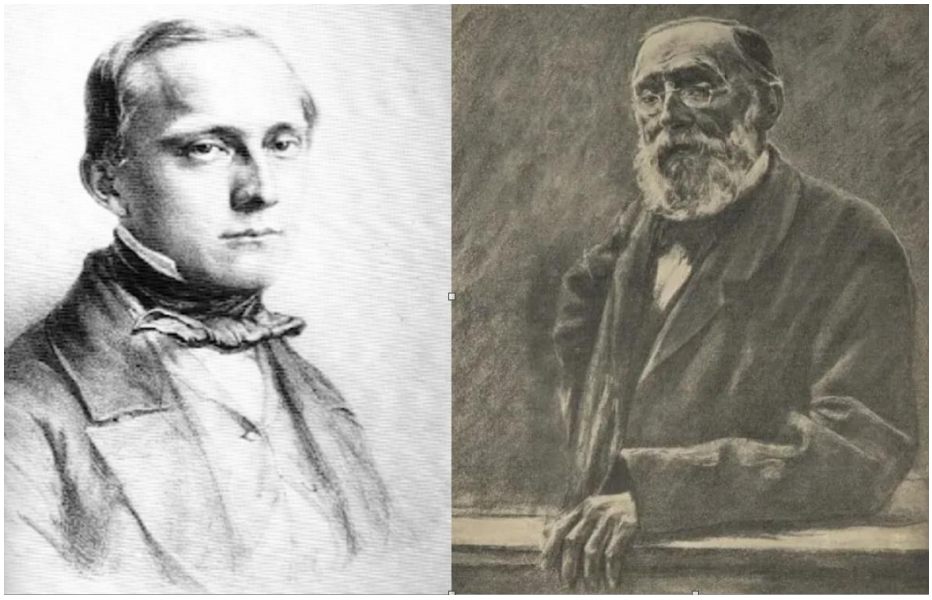
Was Virchow a revolutionary or a reactionary? – Akif Akalın

https://toplumcutip.blogspot.com/2026/08/virchow-devrimci-miydi-yoksa-gerici-mi.html



Recently, one of my students told me that an article he read portrayed Virchow as a reactionary scientist who opposed the theory of evolution. However, in my lectures, I had described Virchow as a very different, progressive scientist. He was confused.

Indeed, Rudolf Virchow, along with Friedrich Engels, one of the architects of Marxist thought, was a scientist who laid the foundations *of social medicine. In my book, Introduction to Social Medicine: Lecture Notes on Social Medicine, published in 201*, I devoted considerable space to Virchow and his work, and in many of my subsequent works, I have referred to Virchow's contributions to social medicine. However, I only referred to Virchow's “youthful years,” or in other words, "young Virchow," given his remarkably long life between 1821 and 1902.

REVOLUTIONARY VIRCHOW

The revolutionary Virchow, while still a fledgling pathologist, challenged the leading pathologist of his time, Austrian Professor Carl von Rokitansky, who explained the development of disease processes using the "humoral" theory of the Hippocratic-Galenic tradition. Virchow criticized this 2,000-year-old doctrine, arguing that the essence of the disease process lay in pathological changes within cellular elements.

The revolutionary Virchow was the one who, in his report aimed at preventing further tragedies in the Upper Silesian coal mines, demanded "*full and complete democracy, democratic government, secularism, education in the mother tongue, land reform, etc.*" Written using dialectical and historical materialism, his report was a medical translation of the theses in Engels' book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, published a few years earlier.

The revolutionary Virchow was the one who, on the night of March 19, 1948, when the working class broke through the barricades in Berlin, stood alongside the workers with his pistol in hand; he was the one elected vice-chairman *of the Berlin Revolutionary Committee. It was Virchow who laid the foundations of socialist medicine* in the journal *Medical Reform*, which he founded on July 10, 1848, and published with the slogan, *Medicine is a social science, politics on a large scale is nothing but medicine.*

I will not repeat here the “revolutionary” period of Virchow's life, which I have discussed in many places. However, in my book I also stated that Virchow abandoned his revolutionary line after the defeat of the revolution and began to follow a *reformist* line (See page 94). I also noted in the same place that Virchow understood Engels “incompletely,” pointing out that while Engels emphasized “production,” Virchow emphasized “distribution and consumption.”

However, it is important to avoid anachronism here. First, it is necessary to remember that the Communist Manifesto had not even been written yet during the years when Virchow was a *revolutionary* in Berlin. Furthermore, the German Social Democratic Workers' Party (Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands), the party of the working class in Germany, was founded in August 1869, long after Virchow's revolutionary years.

YEARS OF EXILE

After the defeat of the 1848 Revolution, Virchow was forced to leave the Charité hospital where he worked, his salary was cut, and he was arrested. While in custody, he refused to sign *a document of repentance that they tried to force him to sign*, and he was forced to leave Berlin.

A seven-year " *exile* " from 1849 to 1856, devoted himself to his academic and personal life there, rarely participating in public life. Shortly before Virchow's arrival, a scientific society had been founded in Würzburg with the aim of *conducting studies in natural sciences and medicine, and*

research into local health. Virchow became a member of the society, quickly assuming the roles of secretary and occasionally president.

The Bavarian government sent the young professor to famine-affected regions (Spessart) in February 1852 to examine the health conditions of the population. What Virchow observed there was reminiscent of what he had seen in Upper Silesia in 1848: the famines stemmed from the extremely poor economic situation and low cultural level of the people. Virchow summarized his travel impressions in a detailed report, which he presented at two meetings of the *Physics-Medical Society* (Physikalisch-Medizinische Gesellschaft) on March 6th and 19th.

The report revealed the socioeconomic and political origins of the famines, and Virchow concluded his report with the sentence, "*Education, welfare, and liberty are the only guarantee of the long-term health of the people," the "revolutionary tone"* of the 1848 Upper Silesian Typhus Epidemic Report was lost. Virchow's political horizon was now limited to a "*constitutional monarchy."*

During his seven years in Würzburg, Virchow, along with his class (the petty bourgeoisie), *grew old* and politically weakened. The bourgeoisie was terrified that the workers, for the first time in history, would rise up as a *class* and threaten their power. Bismarck skillfully exploited the bourgeoisie's fear of a workers' revolution: in one hand he held a "stick" against the revolutionaries, and in the other a "carrot" for the bourgeoisie and to distract the workers' attention from the revolution. On one side, a reckless counter-revolution; on the other, social reform.

Ultimately, Virchow, a product of his own class and era, fell into the "carrot" trap, and "the roles were reversed." The Prussian government, which expelled Virchow from Berlin in 1849, offered him *a professorship at the University of Berlin, Germany's most important university*, in 1856. Virchow returned to Berlin from Würzburg significantly "shifted to the right." His democratic enthusiasm had cooled, but his love for *social reform* still lived on.

FROM VIRCHOW, WHO SHOT AT THE STATE, TO VIRCHOW, THE STATESMAN.

Virchow was elected to *the Berlin City Council* (Stadtverordnetenversammlung) in 1859 and remained a member until his death. He also became a deputy in *the Prussian State Council* (Abgeordnetenhaus) in 1862.

Thanks to his organizational skills and critical mind, he quickly rose to prominence among the members of the Berlin City Council. He championed the cause of improving Berlin's sanitation and, above all, ridding Berlin of waste and sewage. However, sewage is closely linked to water supply: without water supply, there can be no proper sewage system.

Virchow, above all, demanded that the people of Berlin be provided with sufficient and high-quality water. He also requested the construction of facilities to collect all waste and sewage. Finally, he demanded that sewage be removed from Berlin and disinfected. These measures were completely new in the 1860s. Berlin owes these structures, whose traces we still see today, to Virchow.

Virchow said the following about these studies:

> "*It took a great struggle for the City Council to embark on these magnificent initiatives. Years of research preceded it, but in the end, the City Council, with the strength of its own belief, made a decision and remained firmly committed to it, even when the opinions of officials changed and doomsayers sprang up like mushrooms. Thus, Berlin became a clean, healthy and, to some extent, even beautiful city*."

So Virchow was continuing his fight according to his own perspective, but he was now *in a different arena*.

Thanks to Virchow's insistence, a series of hygiene measures were implemented in hospitals, schools, and workers' housing. Of course, the city hospitals were not raised to the level that the "young" Virchow envisioned: they did not become centers of scientific and pedagogical work and affordable medical care for the urban poor. Nevertheless, order was established in the hospitals through Virchow's efforts. At Virchow's initiative, a large barracks hospital for epidemics was built in Moabit, and a large children's hospital was built in Berlin.

On June 6, 1861, Virchow, along with liberals and democrats, founded and became the leader of *the Progressive Party* (Deutsche Fortschrittspartei). A left-liberal party, the Progressive Party advocated for constitutional monarchy, the rule of law, parliamentary rights, and German unity, opposing the ruling Bismarck regime.

In his 1906 article, *The Victory of the Cadets and the Tasks of the Workers' Party*, Lenin stated, "*The petty bourgeoisie, in all countries and under all political alliances, inevitably oscillates between*

revolution and counter-revolution." Virchow, in his political life as a petty-bourgeois intellectual, experienced the same hesitations Lenin described. In the provincial assembly, he sometimes sharply opposed the government. Indeed, in 1865, during a meeting of the Budget Committee, he argued so fiercely with Bismarck that Bismarck challenged him *to a duel*.

REACTIONARY VIRCHOW

Over the years, Virchow's dissenting fervor waned, and his speeches increasingly included phrases like, "*We must preserve the old and build the new upon it,*" and "*We strive for reform, not revolution.*"

In July 1866, Bismarck declared war on Austria with the aim of securing dominance over Germany. Although Virchow advocated for German unification, he opposed the war. Despite never being a pro-war figure, when the war with Austria began, Virchow felt obligated to help the Prussian army and founded the "Berlin Association for Field Aid to the German Armed Forces." The association organized a train to transport wounded soldiers to the rear, and Virchow personally drove the train to the front.

Meanwhile, an experience unfolded that struck fear into the hearts of all the bourgeoisie of the world. The working class, defeated in 1848, succeeded in overthrowing capital in Paris in 1871 and seizing power. The Paris Commune truly terrified capital and prompted it to take new measures against the working class. Bismarck, with his characteristic cunning, skillfully exploited Virchow's "indecisiveness" and waged a struggle against socialists, democrats, and revolutionaries—that is, against the very political ideas Virchow had once fought for. Virchow, after 1871, increasingly opposed the socialists and advocated for cooperation with the Prussian Junker government.

In this process, Bismarck, in an attempt to control the Catholic Church and its political representative, the Centre Party, abolished the Catholic section of the Ministry of Culture in July 1871 and banned priests from engaging in politics in November. This initiative, known as *Kulturkampf* (Cultural Campaign) (a name coined by Virchow), was followed by the nationalization of church schools, the mandatory nature of civil marriage, and the cessation of state aid to the church. Virchow, whom Bismarck had challenged to a duel just a few years earlier, supported Bismarck's initiative from the beginning and stood by his side.

In 1880, Virchow was elected to the German Reichstag. At the Reichstag's first session, on May 10, 1880, Virchow addressed the deputies, declaring himself "*completely free from feelings of hatred or antipathy toward Bismarck, and proudly stating that his party rejected no measure that Bismarck approved, presented, and defended*."

"*We have always been happy to vote for any measure presented by Prince Bismarck* ."

Virchow's Progressive Party merged with the *Liberal Party* (Liberale Vereinigung) in 1884 to form the *Free Thought Party* (Deutsche Freisinnige Partei). Virchow held high-ranking positions on the party's Central Committee. The Free Thought Party was a petty-bourgeois party with a radical stance. Its members, who considered themselves "free thinkers," voiced the views of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia in Parliament.

In his imperial address to the Reichstag in 1881, Bismarck stated that "*the solution to social problems should be sought not only in suppressing social democratic demonstrations, but also in positively promoting the welfare of workers*." This speech, supported by Virchow, foreshadowed the introduction of social insurance in Germany in 1883.

These petty-bourgeois political vacillations, which led Virchow to side with Bismarck, proved fatal to his scientific work: he transformed from a pioneering fighter for the "natural scientific" method in medicine, a fervent defender of evolutionary theory, to a fierce opponent of Darwinism and a proponent of clerical ideas in medicine.

YOUNG VIRCHOW VS. OLD VIRCHOW

In preparing his report on the Upper Silesia Typhus Epidemic, a classic in public health, the young Virchow used what he called a "*natural scientific*" method. This method led him, in many cases, to a *materialistic* path: he explained pathological processes as changes in the material particles of the human body that could be observed with the naked eye or under a microscope. He boldly rejected metaphysical and speculative explanations of disease events.

Of course, in the years since Virchow's death, our understanding of the nature of the disease process has changed significantly. First and foremost, these changes stem from the fact that the organism is now viewed as a unified whole, and pathological changes are primarily explained by the harmful

effects of external conditions. The materialist understanding has become firmly established in pathology.

However, the misfortune that led to a series of errors for the elderly Virchow lay in his socio-political decline over the years. Virchow's life offers a brilliant example of how scientific views can be closely linked to social/political views:

In his youth, Virchow was a *democrat* . Young Virchow revolutionized medicine with his *cellular pathology* and made radical proposals to combat hunger. In his old age, however, he became *a liberal*, a counter-revolutionary, and used his authority to help the government fight socialists. The elder Virchow did "minor work" in public life; in medicine, he created nothing particularly special other than developing old ideas.

As early as 1856, three years before Darwin's famous book *On the Origin of Species* was published, the young Virchow developed views very similar to Darwin's. After Darwin's book was published, he adopted and popularized Darwin's views without ever saying, "*I had thought of these before*."

But in 1877, Virchow the Elder took up arms against Darwinism, entering the fight. He condemned Darwinism as an unscientific hypothesis and was enraged that the consistent application of Darwin's teachings would lead to socialism.

The elder Virchow frightened people with the specter of *the Paris Commune*. He later went so far as to suggest banning the teaching of evolutionary theory in schools and even spoke of a "*creative act*" that brought life to Earth.

Darwin said the following about Virchow's attacks:

> "*Virchow's behavior is dishonest, and I hope one day he realizes this and feels ashamed of himself*."

CONCLUSION

In 2013, two years after I published my book titled *Introduction to Social Medicine: Social Medicine Lecture Notes, our esteemed professor and mentor,* Çağatay Güler, also published a book

titled *Rudolf Virchow in 2015*. While the book recounts Virchow's life story, it makes no mention of his "*political mistakes*" and even presents his support for Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* (cultural struggle) with a *positive* implication.

Çağatay Güler only describes Virchow's opposition to Koch's "*germ theory*" as a *significant error*, but explains the reason in a tone *that would excuse Virchow's mistake:*

> "He was concerned that *accepting diseases as being caused solely by disease-causing microorganisms might lead to the neglect of social factors. In this case, there might be a tendency to avoid the difficulty of taking social measures and instead resort to simple solutions* ."

I didn't ask him, but it's likely that Çağatay Güler's hand hadn't reached the point of writing about the mistakes of a giant like Rudolf Virchow, which I have discussed in this article. Frankly, I felt the same way in my own book, contenting myself with alluding to the elder Virchow's errors in a veiled way.

But I cannot say that we are alone in this attitude. *Nikolay Semashko, the first Minister of Health who organized socialist medicine in the Soviet Union*, said the following about Virchow in his book titled *Koch-Virchow,* published in 1934:

> "*Virchow's public (and scientific) star faded in his old age. But this in no way diminishes Virchow's true contribution to humanity*."

Further Reading:

Report on the Typhus Epidemic in Upper Silesia (1848) - https://toplumcutip.blogspot.com/2020/06/yukar-silezya-tifus-salgn-raporu-1848.html

The Virchow–Koch (and von Behring) Debate (within Marxism, Health and Medicine) - https://archive.org/details/marksizm-saglik-ve-tip-1